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EDUCATIONAL REFORM: PRINCIPLES AND POLITICS

Summary:

Why would a country with a literacy rate of 99 percent be dissatisfied with its educational system? Despite educational standards that are among the highest in the world and unparalleled in certain subject areas, the Japanese government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, is seriously addressing the issue of rectifying perceived weaknesses in a system that has made possible much of the country's postwar economic progress.

At issue is not only the quality of instruction in the schools but also the social values underlying the educational system. Although the current round of reformist debate may lead to few changes, if any, the fact that Japan is even undertaking such an analysis provides insights into the way Japanese society functions and has profound implications for its economic competitors.

The Education System: Origins and Pre-War Developments

One of the reasons Japan was able to modernize so rapidly after nearly three centuries of isolation was because it had already developed an extensive educational system. The first formal schools in Japan were established in the mid-1600s by ruling daimyo in local fiefs to provide education for their samurai retainers. The apparent motivation for establishing the schools was to ensure that retainers possessed sufficient educational skills conducive to leadership along with combat skills necessary for attaining and defending the

fiefdoms. Schools supported by local governmental authorities were established shortly afterwards for training promising local notables for leadership roles in the communities. The final element of the early education system were the terakoya, elementary schools for commoners attached to local temples and supported by funds from the priests. It is significant to note that much of the thrust of education from the 1600s on was for preparing elites to assume their roles in society, along with the goal of elevating the average educational standards for the masses. These contradictory elements are the central issues in much of the present debate on educational reform.

By 1780, there were 49 daimyo-managed domain schools, 54 gogaku schools and 558 terakoya. These numbers grew rapidly for the next 40 years, until a total of at least 12,000 and perhaps as many as 17,000 schools dotted the countryside, most of them temple elementary schools for commoners. Although precise statistics are unavailable, reputable scholars have concluded that the literacy rate in Japan by the early 1870s was between 40 and 50 percent for males and in the neighborhood of 15 percent for women.

A formal, centrally administered education system was established during the Meiji era. The system that developed over the early Meiji years remained virtually unchanged until the postwar Occupation period. The school system then was characterized by a six-year elementary program compulsory for both males and females. The educational path that followed depended on one's status, sex and abilities (primarily the former two). Under the pre-war system, males faced an additional six years of compulsory, but part-time education. Options for girls were fewer, but higher education opportunities were available in some cases. No uniform educational system existed beyond the elementary level. Instead, there were a series of higher learning institutions that ultimately led students to more learned fields or various levels of vocational training. The pre-war system was criticized for its relative lack of egalitarianism, although in recent years certain features, primarily the variety of educational institutions available, have found defenders.

Present State of Education

Significant alterations were made in the educational system during the Occupation period. Multiple track schooling was replaced by a uniform structure along the lines of the United States system, focusing on six years of elementary education, three years in junior high schools, three-year high schools and a four-year college program. Compulsory education was expanded to nine years. Authorities vastly increased opportunities for university-level training at a rate that many American and Japanese scholars feared would dilute the value of the education.

The Japanese educational system today is arguably the finest in the world. Educators around the globe recognize the capabilities of Japanese students in mathematics, for example, concluding that much of the nation's economic performance is attributable to the caliber of its academic institutions -- just as it is suggested that reduced American competitiveness is the direct result of lower overall educational standards and the continued emphasis of liberal arts at the expense of the sciences.

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There are now more than 58,000 educational institutions in Japan with total enrollment of more than 26.7 million. Despite the fact that only the first nine years of school are compulsory, fully 94 percent of Japan's youth attend high schools, with about a 2 percent dropout rate. More than 30 percent of high-school graduates enroll in higher learning institutions, a rate comparable to this country's.

Yet the educational system has come under fire for allegedly producing students who are moribund -- burned out from years of cramming for selective entrance examinations to the nation's elite universities. Japan has become, some insist, a society that pursues prestigious degrees at the expense of individual values, and neglects to impart an overall perspective that gives a healthy meaning to life. Critics charge that pressures begin in the pre-school years and compound until the goal is attained. Increasing numbers experience a sense of aimlessness by peaking out at 19, or become social dropouts -- even suicide statistics -- in the most extreme cases. There is evidence of increased school violence, which has been blamed in part on rigid advancement systems that allow little, if any, room for flexibility or for individuals to "discover themselves."

The core of the system of advancement is the entrance examination system. Exams can begin as early as pre-school, but certainly by junior high school. Pressures culminate at the collegiate level, where there is no uniform examination similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Test in the United States that allows students to take a single test and submit the same score to one or more schools. Therefore, students must set their goal for a single school and focus entirely on preparing for that instutition's examination to advance. Schools hold their testing sessions on only one or two days, effectively limiting a student's potential selections. Those who fail to advance can sometimes opt for a lesser institution if vacancies develop, but usually are forced to remain outside the educational system for a year or more to prepare again for the university examination.

One of the most serious criticisms of the present system is that it is not so much directed toward developing the students' innate abilities as toward selecting the members of society that will be allowed to enter the elite ranks. Education has traditionally been viewed as the "ticket" to higher society. The terakoyo of earlier centuries produced many of Japan's leaders of the 19th century, and education was often the path for sons and ocassionally daughters of the merchant class to advance in society. Today, admission to the "right" university virtually guarantees entry to the upper ranks of the business world or to a prestigious government career. Educators argue that while academic institutions should indeed provide equal opportunities for advancement, the present system loses sight of education in favor of advancement.

While this litany of weaknesses is familiar to both Japanese and Americans, an equally profound concern is the focus of a growing group of academics in Japan. A country whose ultimate resource is its people, Japan is painfully sensitive to its economic dependence, as evidenced by what some term an export mentality and never-ending concerns over resource availability. This sense of vulnerability underlies much of the current motivation for re-examining the nation's educational goals. Economists assume that the country

cannot continue exporting automobiles forever; competition from developing nations has already resulted in reduced global market shares in shipping, steel and other key Japanese industries and most analysts forecast a continuing decline. In a world where Japan will be forced to live by its wits and not its VCR exports, many educators and government officials argue that examination of the educational system is critical, for although it may be good enough for now -- or perhaps even superior -- it will not be enough to assure survival in the future.

Previous Reform Drives

In 1970 the Ministry of Education initiated a major drive to define problem areas in the educational system and draft possible solutions for those ills. The final report of the reform committee, issued in 1971, identified the system's rigidity, harsh examination system and the extremely high priority on achievement as the principal weaknesses, but failed to propose the means to rectify these problems. That was just as well, since the fervor surrounding reform faded as the oil shocks of the early 1970s began dominating press headlines and policymakers' attention.

Appearing at the same time as the Education Ministry's review was a study issued by a special committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This study, prepared in 1970 and released the following year, cited one weakness after another in Japan's educational system, particularly at the university level. The academic world was criticized for its conformity, lack of innovative teaching, overemphasis on testing and Byzantine administration. The OECD report contributed to the general debate about education in Japan, but was insufficient to push educators to institute significant reforms.

The Nakasone Initiative

In 1982, the new prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, identified educational reform as a major issue and began to focus attention on the subject once again. To understand the thrust of the current reform initiative, it is essential to try to identify the philosphical underpinnings of the prime minister's view of education.

Much has been made of Mr. Nakasone's reference to "settling the postwar accounts." Although he has never elaborated on the notion, his actions and the policy issues he has placed at the top of his agenda indicate its general thrust. Mr. Nakasone has tackled many of the postwar political taboos with the apparent intention of ending the era once and for all, enabling Japan to enter the international arena without any encumbrances. The steps he has taken thus far are intended both to restore the essence of Japanese society, which he apparently feels has either slipped away due to material excesses and increased self-indulgence, or was denied Japan by virtue of the Occupation reforms.

Among Nakasone's top concerns are defense, administrative reform and education -- issues that are symbolic but represent problems that the prime minister apparently feels plague Japan. In all cases, the thrust of his policies has been to institute innovations or rectify old policies that for one reason or another limit Japan's potential to assume its full global responsibilities and prerogatives.

Take defense. The one percent of gross national product limit on defense spending has restricted the country's ability to expand its Self-Defense Forces and assume a larger regional security role. Mr. Nakasone, while hedging when appropriate, has not gone to great lengths to hide his dislike for a policy that places arbitrary limits on the country's options and restricts what he sees as Japan's right to defend itself. While concerned with international cooperation, the prime minister seems more attuned to the fact that the spending cap inhibits Japan's defense options and impinges on the country's sovereignty. While finding a replacement for the one percent limit, or abolishing it altogether has been an exceedingly touchy task, Mr. Nakasone has not shied away from the issue, despite the fact that political expedience would favor dropping it.

Administrative reform is another example, but in this case the emphasis is on eliminating outdated structures that constrict internal economic growth and, by implication, Japan's ability not simply to survive but to remain ahead of the pack in global competition. Thus far, the telecommunications and tobacco monopolies have been restructured, allowing the government to keep a hand in developments in these fields while alleviating the budgetary pressures that result from inefficiency. Reorganizing the Japanese National Railway system -- should it actually come to pass -- will further reduce government budget problems, enhancing the country's economic stability for the coming decades.

Educational reform combines elements of economic as well as spiritual concerns. The prime minister's concept of post-Nakasone Japan endows it with confidence in its own uniqueness, operating as an equal among major nations in all economic and political spheres. To achieve that plateau, the country must assure its economic viability but also rediscover its essential qualities. Education is a key factor in both realms.

This is where the issue of educational reform gets sticky. Japan is currently reassessing its postwar experiences and, some contend, glossing over the war and instituting a revisionist philosophy regarding its responsibilities and actions. For the younger generation, which learned little of the war because of a temporary ban by Occupation authorities on the teaching of Japanese history, the grounds are fertile for absorbing what many fear will be a distorted perception of the past and an equally skewed view of Japan's optimal role in the future. Mr. Nakasone would certainly like to relieve Japan of any lingering wartime guilt and restore a sense of pride to a younger generation that seems increasingly aimless by Japanese standards. To critics, however, this suggests an unwelcome return to rampant nationalism.

Much of the debate over the "6-3-3" system -- six years of elementary school and three each in junior high and high school -- is attributed to this post-Occupation fever, which suggests that critics favor a restoration of the pre-war grade levels or some other alternative simply because the present system was introduced by a foreign force. These sentiments are particularly evident in the proliferation of calls to restore the teaching of morals in the public schools. Although some authorities now say it was a mistake to totally eliminate moral education after the war -- just at a time when new values were being sought -- many Japanese scholars and outside observers feel that "moral education" smacks of pre-war emperor worship. Seconding that sentiment, the

powerful Japan Teacher's Union (Nikkyoso) views talk of moral education as an effort to inject government policies into the classroom and establish state-sanctioned moral guidelines for hiring and firing teachers. To understand the depth of the emotions surrounding this issue, one need only compare it with school prayer or similar issues in this country.

Another concern is that the prime minister is trying to get political mileage for career purposes. Although concerns over the quality of education are evident among students, parents and top education officials, some view Mr. Nakasone's efforts to draw the issue into the political spectrum as a means of creating a bogus dispute to further his ambitions. This was particularly evident in the 1983 lower house elections. Mr. Nakasone's critics claimed that he was trying to divert attention from government economic policies and the fiasco of Kakuei Tanaka's conviction by focusing on educa- tional reform, a legitimate concern for students and parents but hardly the subject of a national election campaign. Similar criticism has emerged in the wake of the prime minister's expressed interest in raising the issue during next year's Tokyo summit.

An emotional aspect of the argument about educational goals in Japan concerns the wisdom of injecting the strong sense of self that in the United States favors the individual over the greater good of society. Overstating the case somewhat, many Japanese feel that the United States has lost its drive to compete and the strength that enabled the country to become a global power. This view from across the Pacific decries the problems produced by an absence of moral resolve, as evidenced by shoddy workmanship in products and massive social problems in the schools. Japan has more openly embraced many other American values: an emphasis on the individual, a desire for greater leisure and an appreciation for the needs of the family. But some officials apparently hope to nip this trend in the bud before it develops the excesses that they see plaguing the United States. Hence, the emphasis on reforming schools. Educational reform could be the means for retaining the best of both worlds: the flexibility that allows individuals to reach their full potential coexisting with social values that underscore the importance of placing society's welfare above that of any particular individual.

Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations

The Nakasone cabinet established a special advisory commission on educational reform on August 7, 1984. Under the chairmanship of Michio Okamoto, former president of the prestigious Kyoto University, the commission in short order released general observations and recommendations for implementing a number of broad changes. Presented formally to the cabinet June 26, 1985, the commission's recommendations sharply resembled those of a decade before -- suggesting that the problems have been known for some time -- with generous doses of the Nakasone philosophy thrown in. Among its remarks are the following:

- Although Japan's educational system has served as a social equalizer, enabling families of diverse backgrounds to benefit from the country's economic growth, the system has contributed to a situation where individual personality strengths are not recognized and indeed may be discouraged. This may be a contributing factor in the increase in unrest in the schools, which have seen a disturbing rise in violence.

- Rather than emphasizing education for its role in establishing social equality, society has come to view the educational system as a means to achieve status. This has produced negative social consequences that must be addressed.

- Revisions are required in the following areas: additional options in established curricula; opportunities for individual expression and creativity; emphasis on the fundamentals of education, including moral values; and an appreciation of Japan's international role.

- Continuing education should be fostered to provide outlets for those who have already finished their formal schooling and to facilitate adjustments to changing social and economic conditions.

- Creativity should be encouraged. "Creativity, the ability to think, expressiveness and the will to act," the report insists, "will be the qualities needed for an individual [to cope] with the social changes of the twenty-first century." Rather than emphasizing memorization of facts, education should be structured so that individuals "acquire and apply information properly, think independently, create and express themselves."

The council also set its agenda for implementing these reforms by detailing areas of future discussions. The commission is presently reviewing the administrative structure, the role of research in teaching, factors affecting the academic environment, advanced degrees, and application processes -- including the notorious examination system.

In some respects, the conservatism of the commission is as significant as the proposals themselves. For example, the phrase "fundamentals of education" refers primarily to the moral and social values imparted by the system, not reading, writing and arithmetic. The commission report reflects a consensus that the system is conformist in nature, but the authors are equally cautious in endorsing specific proposals for allowing greater individuality, apparently because of fears about the negative consequences of such a step. While calling for "internationalizing" the Japanese educational system through greater student exchange programs, it made little or no mention of remedial education for students who go abroad or even shifting the start of the school year from April to September, two relatively simple steps that would facilitate such exchanges.

Implementing Reforms

Implementing the proposed changes will be difficult since it conflicts with many values that are deeply ingrained. The foremost conflict will involve encouraging individuality in a society in which group values are emphasized. An old adage in Japan has it that the "extruding nail will be hammered down." Japanese society not only discourages one from standing out but in some cases punishes the individual for doing so. Japanese students attending exchange programs abroad, for example, are not rewarded but in a sense are punished because they fall behind their colleagues, thus jeopardizing their chances of passing the difficult college entrance examinations. What is considered to be a valuable, positive experience in most societies is instead a risky decision that endangers Japanese students' educational and even career goals.

Related to this dilemma is the Japanese concept of equality. Where equality in the American educational system implies equal opportunity for individuals to excel, the Japanese concept refers to equality of achievement. An equitable society is one in which all members are the same in terms of achievement and social status. Obviously, every individual in Japanese society is not equal in that sense; only a select few go on to enter Tokyo University and are virtually assured of prestigious careers in business or government. However, the dilemma facing the reformers is that not all students have an equal opportunity in practical terms to enter Tokyo University (and even those who do sometimes make sacrifices that may not be worthwhile in a societal sense). Consequently, there is increasing pressure for greater equality of opportunity, with the feeling that the minimum educational and economic standards in Japanese society are now high enough to ensure Japanese-style equality to most of the population.

Intertwined with this emotional argument is a practical concern over maintaining high educational standards. Japanese educators, particularly those involved in reform questions, have watched developments in the American educational system closely over the years and are concerned that instituting certain Western concepts in Japan will lead to a distinct lowering of educational standards. "The American system is very good in letting the cream rise to the top," notes one official, "but in the process it neglects the average student," implying that the quality of education for most American students is below par. He adds that the Japanese system has produced uniformly high levels of education, but the excellent student is constrained. The challenge facing Japan is to combine the best of both: high educational standards for the majority and success for outstanding individuals -- preserving Japanese notions of equality and fairness at the same time.

Another conflict inherent in the educational reform issue is that Japan is a very class-conscious society. The language's multiple grammatical forms reflect distinct degrees of inferior and superior relationships. Such emotions are so deeply rooted that change will be difficult at best. Furthermore, there is a great premium on making it to the top, and the hope of reaching that level is enough for many to argue against any significant alteration of the system. Cynics also note that first-ranked educational instutions, their graduates and the interests that thrive under the current system -- such as publishing companies that enrich themselves through sales of study guides for entrance examinations -- all have vested interests in the present system, posing considerable obstacles to reform.

Political opposition may also prove insurmountable. The two strongest opponents to educational reform are the leftist political parties and Nikkyoso. Nikkyoso is concerned about government control over educators' prerogatives and dislikes being made the scapegoat for the ills of the current system. The union's leaders have endorsed reform in principle, provided it is supported by what the union calls a "true national consensus," but balks at supporting the Nakasone-backed commission or its recommendations lest it include proposals that could be used to justify hiring or firing particular teachers -- or even to break the union. Fear of government-imposed standards for employment are often cited by the union as grounds for its resistance to reform.

Nikkyoso's relations with the goverment -- both central and local authorities -- have been confrontational, and occasionally violent. Union members have routinely objected to even the most trivial matters. Attempts are frequently made to physically prevent candidates for school principal from taking annual qualifying examinations, for example. The union's greatest strength lies in a limited number of politically sensitive prefectures, which tends to concentrate its influence rather than dilute it. Coupled with political support from the Japan Socialist Party and the real concerns of average voters over such issues as returning to pre-war attitudes, the union poses a credible political force that could block reform suggestions altogether, regardless of their potential benefits.

The Future

Few concrete recommendations have been offered thus far. If past experience is any guide, however, it is likely that at least some of the following points will enter into the discussion:

- More diversity and differing identity among universities. A major criticism of the university system in Japan is that despite the number of higher learning institutions, there is little diversity in their offerings. Japanese and foreign critics alike have suggested that universities, particularly the private institutions, should cultivate unique identities, such as, for example, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Greater diversity, they argue, would enhance the competition for promising students while raising overall educational standards at the college level.

- Emphasis on the role of research in education, particularly at the university level.

- Decentralization of the educational process, from selection of textbooks to development of curricula. (Education Ministry officials might argue instead for still greater centralization.)

- Elimination of the disparities between public and private schools. Public schools are far less expensive than private institutions but because of their origins generally are regarded as far superior in quality to private institutions. Denied opportunities to enter the public schools, the children of growing numbers of Japanese are forced to pay for more expensive, but less useful educations.

- Establishment of a universal college entrance examination system, including standardized tests and multiple applications. Elimination or modification of entrance examinations for primary schools.

- Curriculum revisions to reflect a greater emphasis on the humanities. (Some would argue for more emphasis on the sciences, but the key point here is that the consensus is toward continuous revision to reflect anticipated changes in society.)

- Intensified, practical foreign language training. Most Japanese students study English as an elective from junior high school through

college, but leave the educational system with a stiff, formal understanding of the language at best. Although many American educators would be impressed by even this level of foreign language training, Prime Minister Nakasone and others feel that for Japan to become a truly international society higher standards must be attained.

- Added prestige for the role of vocational education linked to the possibility of reducing the college enrollment -- both to assure the quality of higher education and to remove the stigma that attaches to non-degree holders.

- Expanded enrollment at the top universities to make elite education more available to average but promising students.

- Additional funding for schools at all levels.

- Expansion of graduate education. Many Japanese educators believe that the U.S. higher education system is one of its greatest strengths. Graduate programs help enhance skills and provide much of the economy's resiliance. Athough numbers do not necessarily equate with quality, more than one million students were enrolled in 1982 in the U.S. graduate programs, compared with only 61,000 in Japan in 1983.

The Future of Reform

Nothing may come of the present reform fever, but the fact that Japan is seriously examining these issues suggests that the country does mean to restructure the system to enable it to remain a viable economic and political presence in the coming century, not simply the next decade. It also reflects what many outside observers consider to be Japan's greatest strength: a will to examine issues with a long-term perspective.

The education reform drive could have a significant impact in unexpected areas. An American defense specialist who is an astute observer of the Japanese scene notes that any effort to improve education ultimately will have a major effect on Japan's security. With a small military force that is incapable of withstanding a significant challenge, the country's Self-Defense Forces will be forced to rely increasingly on sophisticated intelligence and automated defense systems to assure security interests in the region. Such systems will require increasingly analytical, anticipatory and reactive capabilities far beyond those now in demand. Japan's success in assuring its security, he concludes, will hinge in large part on the educational system's success in providing individuals with those abilities.

Contrary to the view of many American observers, however, the reform drive will not lead -- at least consciously -- to a more Westernized Japan. Indeed, this is a conservative revolution aimed at preventing just that. It is, in the extreme, the West that many in Japan feel is responsible for the perceived laziness and selfishness in Japanese youth today. Educators admire the individuality generated by the U.S. school system, but hope to confine it to academic achievement and prevent its becoming a personal lifestyle for Japanese students.

One implication of this approach may be that some policymakers, including the prime minister, view these values as intrinsically weaker than the traditional Japanese ones. This has potent implications, particularly when concerns over a return to the 1930s come into play. But the important point is that many in Japan are very sincere in their conviction and belief that education is the key to remaining a viable, self-contained force in the future, and are equally serious about achieving that goal. United States, take note.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Japan Economic Institute.

Table 1: Schools and Enrollment, 1983

	Number of Institutions	Teachers (thousands)	Students (thousands)
Total	58,499	1,267.7	26,709.8
Universities	458	109.1	1,834.5
National	96	50.6	435.5
Public	34	6.0	53.5
Private	328	52.5	1,345.5
Junior colleges	532	17.2	379.4
Professional schools	62	3.8	47.2
Senior high schools	5,368	252.6	4,715.2
National/public	4,097	196.1	3,399.5
Private	1,271	56.5	1,315.7
Junior high	10,950	273.7	5,706.8
Primary	25,044	474.0	11,739.5
Kindergartens	15,190	99.8	2,192.9
Others	895	37.5	94.5

Table 2: Rates of Advancement

	From Lower Secondary		From Upper Secondary		
			To College		
	To Upper Secondary	To Workforce	Male	Female	To Workforce
1950	42.5%	45.2%	34.6%	17.2%	44.9%
1960	57.7	38.6	19.7	14.2	61.3
1965	70.7	26.5	30.1	20.4	60.4
1970	82.1	16.3	25.0	23.5	58.2
1975	91.9	5.9	33.8	34.6	44.6
1980	94.2	3.9	30.3	33.5	42.9
1983	94.0	3.9	27.7	32.4	41.5

Source: Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1984